

Applied Research

A LINKAGES
Update

Gaps and Guidance

March 2000

Current Issues

While a great deal is known about the health and child spacing benefits of breastfeeding, considerably less is known about how best to promote breastfeeding. Public and private organizations have used a variety of strategies to promote such key breastfeeding behaviors as early initiation and exclusive breastfeeding. Of the few rigorous studies that document the impact of breastfeeding promotion, most are clinic-based. Rigorous assessments of the impact of community-based, non-clinical interventions are rare, leaving program planners and policymakers with little scientific guidance about "what works best."

An extensive review of the literature on the impact of breastfeeding interventions¹ identifies the following seven major research gaps:

1. Audience analysis to identify mothers most in need of breastfeeding education,
2. Effectiveness of mothers' support groups in promoting exclusive and continued breastfeeding,
3. Influence of peer counselors on breastfeeding behaviors,
4. Role of mass media in changing breastfeeding behaviors and sustaining behavior change,
5. Influence on others of individuals who already practice optimal behaviors,
6. Cost-effectiveness of programs, and
7. Impact of changing national policies on the quality of services, breastfeeding behaviors, and providers' knowledge, attitudes, and practices.

LINKAGES' Response

LINKAGES is addressing several of these gaps through four applied research studies. These studies are designed to identify the pro-

gram strategies that are most effective in bringing about positive behavior change and improved health of infants and women of reproductive age. They focus on breastfeeding, complementary feeding, and maternal nutrition. Behavior change strategies being tested include mother-to-mother support groups, home visits, informal contacts, counseling, modified trials of improved practices, "positive deviance," and social marketing.

The studies will:

- document program impact,
- test alternative program approaches to improving infant and maternal nutrition,
- provide on-going guidance to program staff based on research results, and
- promote critical consciousness among policymakers, program implementers, researchers, and others about how inquiry can be used to improve programs.

LINKAGES' research partners include leading PVOs (La Leche League International, CARE, Save the Children), universities (Johns Hopkins University, Emory University, and Eastern Virginia Medical School), Cooperating Agencies (Population Services International), and research institutes.

Study 1: Testing the La Leche League model in Guatemala: Does mother-to-mother breastfeeding support work?

This is the first study to rigorously test the most well-known and widespread strategy for promoting breastfeeding: mother-to-mother support groups pioneered by La Leche League International. For the past ten years, La Leche League Guatemala has trained and supported more than 200 volunteer breastfeeding counselors in low-income, peri-urban areas of Guatemala.

This study tests the hypothesis that La Leche League breastfeeding support (including mother-to-mother support groups and household visits) improves breastfeeding practices at the community level. A second hypothesis tests whether increasing the ratio of breastfeeding counselors to women of reproductive age results in signifi-

¹Green, C.P. (1999) Improving breastfeeding behaviors: Evidence from two decades of intervention research. LINKAGES/Academy for Educational Development. Washington DC.



cantly higher rates of exclusive breastfeeding and lower rates of bottle usage among children less than six months old.

The Guatemala study uses a pre-/post cross-sectional design to compare 650 infants less than six months of age and includes a census, a survey of mothers, and interviews with breastfeeding counselors. One hundred additional breastfeeding counselors will be trained as part of the study. Findings from the research will enable program planners at La Leche League and elsewhere to better allocate resources and design effective, efficient programs to increase the prevalence of exclusive breastfeeding. Timeline: 9/99-9/01

Study 2: Informing Zimbabwean women about HIV transmission through breastfeeding: Does counseling affect infant feeding decisions, skills, and behaviors?

HIV can be transmitted from infected mothers to their babies during breastfeeding. UN policy recommends that HIV-positive women be fully informed about various infant feeding options, including replacement feeding, and supported in their individual decisions about how to feed their babies. LINKAGES is conducting research to understand the context within which women make infant feeding decisions.

The ZVITAMBO (Zimbabwe Vitamin A for Mothers and Babies) Project includes a qualitative and a quantitative component. The qualitative research, completed in 1999, included market surveys, focus groups, and in-depth interviews (among known HIV positives, known HIV negatives, and women with unknown HIV status). Information was gathered to assess costs associated with each feeding option; the availability of replacement foods; potential stigmatization of women who choose not to breastfeed; and caregivers' ability to properly breastfeed, express and heat-treat breastmilk, and prepare commercial infant formula. This information was used in developing an intervention to inform women of infant feeding options.

The quantitative study, currently underway, will assess the impact of information and counseling about HIV transmission on women's knowledge, skills, and actual feeding practices. Results from both the qualitative and quantitative studies will provide guidance to the Government of Zimbabwe and to other agencies regarding how

best to counsel women about infant feeding in the context of high HIV prevalence. Timeline: 2/99-2/01

Study 3: Improving breastfeeding and complementary feeding practices in Vietnam: How does a positive deviance approach work?

Vietnam has one of the highest rates of childhood malnutrition in the world. Since 1990, Save the Children/US has used "positive deviance" to reduce severe childhood malnutrition in program areas by approximately 75 percent. "Positive deviants" are resource-poor, well-nourished children. Save the Children's program helps parents of poorly nourished children learn how the parents of positive deviant children are able to keep their children well nourished, in spite of tremendous poverty.

A large part of this study on positive deviance focuses on complementary feeding of children 6-24 months of age. Several sub-studies focus on the breastfeeding practices of mothers of infants 0-6 months of age and the impact of their labor outside of the household on breastfeeding practices. Save the Children's experience in using a positive deviance approach to improve breastfeeding practices will inform program managers of its potential as a vehicle for breastfeeding behavior change in other settings. Timeline: 4/99-4/01

Study 4: Improving micronutrient status of women of reproductive age in Bolivia: Does social marketing of a micronutrient supplement work?

This research tests whether increasing the availability of a commercial, low-cost multiple vitamin and mineral supplement (*VitalDía*) affects use of the supplement by women of reproductive age in the Department of Santa Cruz, Bolivia. *VitalDía* is being promoted through the media, workshops, seminars, and point of sale materials. The overall social marketing strategy also includes an information campaign to raise awareness among women, particularly focusing on pregnant and lactating women, about the importance of nutrition to their health. This media campaign will emphasize the consumption of fruits and vegetables.

Among the instruments used in the study were a baseline survey of knowledge, attitudes, practices, and beliefs (KAPB) of 1,704 women of reproductive age; focus groups; distribution surveys; and cost analyses. A follow-up KAPB survey will be administered approximately nine months after product launch. Timeline: 7/98-6/00

Contact the Information Resource Center of the LINKAGES Project for detailed summaries of each applied research study and a list of available reports.

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